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# AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON MEDIATION OF TASTE JUDGEMENTS OF DESIGN OBJECTS

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**Abstract:** *Design mediation is a central topic in fields of design history and design culture. One of the streams in such research focuses on exploring the role of channels used for mediating between producers and consumers. Such design mediations may involve more or less explicit taste judgements, which can be problematic in certain regards. More specifically, although taste judgements have the intention of guiding audiences towards ‘good designs’ and away from ‘bad’ ones, the subjectivity of taste may in fact produce the opposite result. Furthermore, taste judgements may not be that well-intentioned but may instead be used for claiming superiority and/or putting others down. Thus, there are certain ethical issues related to taste judgements, which raises the question of what kinds of taste judgements are ethically sound. To address this question, the paper constructs a framework of ethical taste judgements based on Aristotelian virtue ethics.*

**Keywords:** *design mediation, taste judgements, design communication, design ethics, critical theory*

## INTRODUCTION

Design mediation is a central topic in the fields of design history and design culture (Walker, 1989; Lees-Maffei, 2009; Julier, 2014; Folkmann & Jensen, 2015). Within this topic, Lees-Maffei (2009) identified three streams, the first of which is focused on exploring the role of channels used for mediating between producers and consumers (i.e., television, magazines, corporate literature, advice literature, etc.). Such design mediations may include more or less explicit taste judgements, i.e., statements that attribute particular qualities of certain design objects or point out that they lack these, mostly related to aesthetic aspects (Sibley, 1969, p. 68; Lindell & Mueller, 2011). These types of design mediations are the focus of this paper.

There are no universal standards for what is ‘good taste’ or ‘good design’ (hence, the terms are placed in quotes in this paper), although certain characteristics in some cases tend to make objects more attractive (Norman, 2004, pp. 29–33; Hekkert, 2006; Lindell & Mueller, 2011). Since people often disagree on what is ‘good design’, taste judgements in effect become a criticism of the perspective of someone with a different

taste. As stated by Walker (2009), 'It is an unfortunate but common tendency within human society to associate the discriminating judgements that are influenced by these allegiances [to particular social groupings] with a sense of cultural superiority.' A similar point was made by Carey (2005), who suggested that taste 'is so bound up with self-esteem, particularly among devotees of high art, that a sense of superiority to those with "lower" tastes is almost impossible to relinquish without identity crisis' (see also Bourdieu, 1984). This is by no means just a present-time phenomenon (as further discussed in the literature review in the section below) but also occurred centuries ago, for example, as formulated by the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) (Kant, 1790/1928, p. 52):

Many things may for him possess charm and agreeableness — no one cares about that; but when he puts a thing on a pedestal and calls it beautiful, he demands the same delight from others. He judges not merely for himself, but for all men, and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. Thus he says that the thing is beautiful; and it is not as if he counts on others agreeing with him in his judgment of liking owing to his having found them in such agreement on a number of occasions, but he demands this agreement of them. He blames them if they judge differently, and denies them taste, which he still requires of them as something they ought to have; and to this extent it is not open to men to say: Every one has his own taste. This would be equivalent to saying that there is no such thing as taste, i.e. no aesthetic judgment capable of making a rightful claim upon the assent of all men. (Kant 1790/1928, p. 52)

Besides serving as a means of claiming or demonstrating superiority, taste judgements may also have a more ethically sound agenda, in the sense that they may be aimed at guiding others towards positive effects from certain objects. According to Ahl and Olsson (2002), this position is common in design circles, where discussions of taste are generally avoided, while designers instead deals with the issue as a matter of quality, which can be uncovered in a process of evaluation that leads to some things emerging as superior to others. This particular position has, however, been challenged. For example, Rampell (2002) criticized 'good Scandinavian design', especially design awards (in this case Excellent Swedish Design), arguing that modernist values form the basis of what is considered 'good design'. In other words, Rampell's argument is that it is discourse that shapes reality, rather than the other way around.

For design objects, what is considered 'good taste', and what is not, is to a large extent influenced by design-leading companies, product designers, journalists, and jurors handing out design awards (Kawamura, 2005). As pointed out by Christoforidou et al. (2012), design theorists and design historians also put forth taste judgements as 'a necessary means to consolidate the ideas expressed about design'. Another category of taste judges are celebrities, who more or less explicitly act in this capacity, often in return

for payment from the brands they promote (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016). In fact, Weisfeld-Spolter and Thakkar (2011) propose that in the teen market especially, celebrities are key opinion leaders, influencing teens to adopt new fashion styles. Regular consumers also influence others through taste judgements, for example, via social media (Charlesworth, 2014, p. 303). At the other end of the spectrum, governments sometimes tell their citizens what constitutes ‘good taste’. This phenomenon is not restricted to countries such as North Korea but also occurs in what is perceived as democratically advanced countries, such as Denmark. More specifically, in 2005, the Danish Ministry of Culture appointed a set of committees (including one for ‘design and crafts’) to assemble a collection and presentation of the most important works of Denmark’s cultural heritage (Ministry of Culture Denmark, 2016).

As argued above, taste judgements often involve disagreement, which can be problematic for a variety of reasons. To understand such problems, we need to understand the ethical grounds on which taste judgements may be justified. This topic is addressed here through a brief summary of relevant literature, after which a conceptual framework for taste judgement ethics is developed.

## **LITERATURE ON TASTE**

Taste is a topic that has been debated for centuries, not least within the disciplines of philosophy and sociology. Overall, philosophers often address taste as the aesthetic ability to discern beauty in objects, particularly within the arts, while sociologists conceptualize taste as a cultivated disposition towards a broad range of cultural products and associate taste with social acceptance or attractiveness. Given the limited length of this paper, it offers only an extremely superficial summary of the theoretical discussions of taste that have unfolded over the past centuries.

In the history of debates about the nature of taste, a natural place to start is Francis Hutcheson (1694–1747), who was the first to systematically address art and beauty within the empiricist tradition, as influenced by Locke (Townsend, 2001). In Hutcheson’s perspective, beauty is a feeling that can be traced to certain causal unities in our perception of objects, which forms the empirical basis of our notion of beauty. David Hume (1711–1776) later problematized such ideas by pointing to the issues raised by the subjectivism of taste (Townsend, 2001). More specifically, unlike the early empiricists, Hume (1757) did not believe in an inner sense constituting a faculty of taste for beauty (Townsend, 2001); with this stance, he challenged the basis of the empiricist ideas that rely upon such a sense for contingency. To Hume (1757), taste is a capacity for feeling pleasure, and beauty is not a quality of objects per se but merely exists in the mind that contemplates them (Cohen, 2004, p. 167). Thus, Hume turned away from the properties of objects and focused instead on judges (acknowledged experts) as the source of objectivity for the judgement of taste (Townsend, 2001). Another key figure in relation to

this topic is Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762). Baumgarten derived the term ‘aesthetics’ from the Greek word *aisthetikos*, which may be translated as ‘pertaining to sense perception’. In Baumgarten’s ‘Aesthetica’ (in two parts: 1750 and 1758), the term is used to describe a philosophical discipline that investigates the ‘lower’ sensual aspects of the human experience rather than the ‘higher’ realm of logic (Folkman, 2009). From Baumgarten’s perspective, aesthetics refers to a science of sensitivity, in which beauty affords us a better understanding of the nature of things, an idea that to some extent resembles the notion of intrinsic beauty (Fedrizzi, 2012).

Although Baumgarten is credited for coining the term ‘aesthetics’, many regard Kant as the founder of the discipline of aesthetics within philosophy with his ‘Critique of Judgement’ (‘Kritik der Urteilskraft’) (Kant, 1790/1928; Townsend, 2001). From Kant’s perspective, aesthetic experience does not refer to the ‘determinately contextualized sensory experience of individual objects’, as Baumgarten suggests but rather to an ‘indeterminate kind of orientation that relates sense and reason’ (Makkreel, 1996, p. 71). Furthermore, while Hume (as an empiricist) focused on unities in objects to set up the criteria for qualified arbiters to authenticate the objectivity of taste, Immanuel Kant argued for a special kind of universality in aesthetic judgement. Kant (1790/1928) described taste as the feeling that belongs to ‘aesthetic intuition’, a kind of intuition that logically precedes thinking; as such, it is prior to all practical concerns and free of concepts and goals.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) introduced the concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’ in his book ‘The Theory of the Leisure Class’ (Veblen, 1899/2005). Veblen’s perspective on taste may be seen as lying in between sociological and aesthetic thinking. More specifically, Veblen (1899/2005) drew a distinction between a differentiated pecuniary sense of beauty and an inborn sense of beauty, of which only the latter constitutes a genuine sense of beauty. Veblen was one of the first to point out the downward flow of fashion (Stone, 2004; Brannon, 2005), which later inspired Georg Simmel’s (1858–1918) work on fashion trends. According to Simmel (1905/1981, p. 13), when the lower classes begin to appropriate a given fashion trend, and thus transcend the boundaries set by the upper classes, the upper classes abandon the trend and turn towards a new one in order to distinguish themselves from the masses. Thus, in this perspective, fashion ‘is a product of class distinction’ (Simmel, 1905/1981, p. 12). Although Simmel’s ideas have been fairly widely accepted, some have challenged them. For example, Blumer (1969) argued that taste is not just something used to demonstrate elite status but may also be driven by a desire to align oneself with the social zeitgeist. In this perspective, tastemakers group together in anticipation of the next fashion trend.

One of the most influential theorists on taste formation is Pierre Bourdieu, not least with his book ‘Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste’, first published in French in 1979 (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu (1984) argued that taste cannot be understood in isolation, that is, as independent of class relations and social hierarchies. Bourdieu’s

(1984) studies showed that the rich justified and naturalized their economic advantage over others, not only by pointing out their economic capital but also by perceiving themselves as the arbiters of ‘good taste’. Bourdieu (1984) also argued that aesthetic taste judgements are conditioned and, in turn, condition social formation. Thus, Bourdieu was in opposition to notions of ‘taste as reflection’ and even went so far as to call his theory ‘anti-Kantian aesthetics’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 33).

As this brief review illustrates, different perceptions of the nature of taste have been put forth throughout history. This development of taste theories has, however, not led to any broad consensus about the nature of taste, and different accounts based on the work of the above-mentioned theorists can be found in the current literature. The present paper does not subscribe to a particular perspective on taste but merely builds on the moderate assumption that a taste judgement has the potential of benefiting as well as harming people, regardless whether it aims to achieve a desired identity or social position or seeks to guide others towards experiences of beauty.

### **The ethical dimension of taste judgements in design mediation**

To answer the question of what the premises are for making ethically sound taste judgements, the underlying ethical position needs to be defined. According to d’Anjou (2010), in the design disciplines, Kantian ethics is the most widespread guide to professional codes of ethics and practice. Deontological ethics (also known as duty ethics and including Kantian ethics) focuses on the motives for an action. This may be contrasted with consequentialist ethics (including utilitarianism), which focuses on the outcomes of an action. A third main type of ethics is virtue ethics, which represents a somewhat different perspective by emphasizing the virtues or moral character of a person. For example, a virtuous person is someone who is kind because kindness is in his/her nature, rather than because he/she is driven by a desire to maximize utility (i.e., consequentialist ethics) or a sense of duty (i.e., deontological ethics). In the definition of virtue ethics, a key perspective is Aristotle’s (384–322 BCE) three aspects of ethical character or ethos: ‘phronesis’, ‘areté’, and ‘eunoia’ – ‘phronesis’ meaning wisdom and practical skills; ‘areté’ meaning a morally good human being; and ‘eunoia’ meaning the goodwill that a speaker cultivates between him/herself and an audience (Garver 1994, pp. 110–112).

To understand the ethics of taste judgements, virtue ethics offers a useful perspective. More specifically, making taste judgements with ill intentions (areté) is, obviously, unethical per se; making taste judgements without having proper knowledge about the object and the audience (phronesis) involves a risk of producing unintended negative effects; and making taste judgements without having the ability to mediate these as intended (eunoia) involves a risk of being misunderstood and, in effect, incurring unintended negative effects. In relation to taste judgements, the three Aristotelian virtue aspects may be seen as coming into play in what may be perceived as a logical sequence that begins with intention (areté), is followed by the application of knowledge

(phronesis), and concludes with the communication (eunoia) of a taste judgement. This is illustrated in Figure 1, which proposes a framework of the ethical dimensions of taste judgements. The framework includes two examples of ethical issues related to each of the three activities, which are subsequently discussed.

*[----- FIGURE 1 SOMEWHERE AROUND HERE -----]*

An ethically sound intention behind a taste judgement requires considering the well-being of the audience. In the literature on social behaviour, actions can be driven by either altruistic or egoistic motives (Batson, 1991; Batson & Shaw, 1991). In the context of taste judgements, an altruistic motive is an attempt to guide others towards certain designs and away from others for their own benefit. More specifically, taste judgements may aim to enlighten the audience by pointing out object qualities in order to help them choose the objects most capable of providing pleasure, or even happiness, and avoid inferior objects. On the other hand, the egoistic motive concerns the use of taste judgements to position oneself and/or put others down. Whether the person knows that others may be harmed by the communications (and does not care) or simply ignores this aspect, there are obvious ethical issues at stake.

To determine whether a given taste judgement is in the best interests of its audience, the person who makes the judgement needs to understand both the object and the audience in question. This may prove extremely difficult, however, since everyone judges everything according to their own concerns, which are often ethically questionable. More specifically, if the person does not have solid knowledge about the object, his/her claims about the qualities of the object may be erroneous. If the person lacks knowledge of other relevant objects, the qualities attributed to a certain object may, in fact, not be of the claimed relative value. If the person presenting a given taste judgement does not understand the audience, he/she cannot know what benefits or harm certain objects may produce for them. Therefore, making taste judgements without proper knowledge of either the object or the audience involves a risk of doing harm. Thus, even well-intended taste judgements should sometimes be avoided for ethical reasons.

Finally, taste judgements need to be communicated appropriately to achieve the desired effect. This requires adequate communication skills, since failures of communication can cause the message to be misunderstood. For example, if an argument is unintentionally presented in a manner that is overly complex or vague, or if it is perceived as condescending or insensitive or has other, similar shortcomings, it may spark opposition instead of winning the audience over. The taste judge may also include information expected to appeal to the audience, which instead makes all or part of the audience reject the judgment and dislike the product. Apart from the communication itself, the perception of the person presenting the taste judgement may influence how the communication is received. If the audience does not approve of the person conveying the taste judgement, the intended guidance may be negatively perceived. For example, if the

person offering the taste judgement is perceived as having poor taste in relation to the specific object field, is not seen as a legitimate expert, is viewed as dishonest or is rejected for other reasons, this will likely impact the reception in a way that runs counter to the intention of the speaker. Thus, paradoxically, if the objective is to make an audience aware of the qualities of a certain design object, for some persons, the best way to achieve this may be not to speak about these.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has proposed a framework for ethical taste judgements of design objects. The proposed framework demonstrates the difficulty of making taste judgements with certainty of achieving a positive effect. The knowledge dimension in particular poses challenges, since it is debatable what constitutes adequate object knowledge, and because it is problematic to determine what is beneficial for others. One way to address this issue is to avoid taste judgements of a universal character, focusing instead on specific object properties, such as novelty, craftsmanship or similar, while being clear about the context within which a particular design object is discussed.

As previously described, taste judgements of design come in a variety of forms and from a variety of sources, including designers, design award jurors, design-leading companies, journalists, design theorists, design historians, celebrities, consumers, and even governments. Obviously, the function and effect of taste judgments differ, depending on the source. The developed framework may contribute to a better understanding of the ethical dimension of such taste judgements and serve to stimulate further discussion of the topic.

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**Figure 1.** The ethical dimensions of taste judgements

